



Disaster and Emergency Management Resources

Helping Children Cope with a Disaster

- Children may be frightened by the disaster itself or be upset by disruptions that a disaster might cause in their daily routines or their relationships with parents, teachers, and friends. It is not unusual for children to show changes in behaviors that may be signs or symptoms of distress or discomfort following a disaster.
- Young children may be especially affected during these times because of their sense of vulnerability, their lack of understanding, and their difficulty in communicating how they feel. Older children may be affected as well, and like their younger siblings might find it difficult to express their feelings.
- Following a disaster, some children may:
 - Be upset at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, or teddy bear.
 - Have difficulty with separation or be afraid to be left alone. Children may not want to be out of parents' sight and may refuse to go to school or their childcare provider.
 - Be afraid to sleep alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have sleep disturbances, including nightmares, screaming during sleep, and bedwetting, that persist more than several days after the event.
 - Experience loss of concentration and irritability.
 - Be startled easily, jumpy. They may become more active and restless.
 - Display behavior problems; for example, misbehaving in school or at home in ways that are not typical for the child.
 - Have physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found. They may run a fever or not want to eat.
 - Display withdrawal from family and friends, sadness, listlessness, decreased activity, and preoccupation with the events of the disaster.
 - Be afraid of the disaster recurring, or become anxious when there are rain, storms, sirens, or other reminders of the disaster. They may ask many times, "Will it come again?"
 - Become easily upset or cry more frequently.
 - Get angry, act out, or get into trouble. They may hit, throw, and/or kick to show their anger.

- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, or clinging and wanting to be held. They may become upset easily, crying and whining frequently.
 - Be quiet and withdrawn, or not want to talk about the experience.
 - Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.
 - Feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives and homes.
- These changes in behaviors are common in children who have been through a disaster. They are natural responses to stress. Some of these symptoms may last for weeks or months, but they should diminish over time.
 - Except for extreme circumstances (when a family member is killed or severely injured or the child is hurt or traumatized), most children do not develop serious or permanent psychological problems.
 - Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Other children may not show evidence of being upset until several weeks or months later.
 - What parents can do to help children cope:
 - Keeping children informed, supporting them emotionally, and getting them involved in the family's efforts to prepare for or recover from a disaster will keep the family together.
 - Speak simply and honestly about the situation. Explain to your children what is happening to your family using simple words they can understand. Be honest, and keep children informed of a problem that will directly affect them.
 - Help young children understand the disaster. Explain how disasters are unusual but natural patterns of weather. Children should know that disasters are not some kind of punishment for something they did.
 - Reassure children about the family safety. Say, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
 - Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Is there fear, anxiety, or insecurity?
 - Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Children frequently express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks, or friends after a disaster.
 - Make time to comfort and reassure your children. You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times. Do not stop responding just because you already told the child once or even 10 times.
 - Hold your child. Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period. Close contact helps assure children that you are there and will not abandon them.

- Maintain some routine activities during disruptive times to provide children with a sense of stability and control. This might include dinnertime at the kitchen table or a bedtime story. Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.
 - Talk with children about how you feel. The way children see and understand your responses to a disaster is very important. You should admit your concerns but also stress your family's abilities to cope with the situation.
 - Give children something productive to do appropriate for their age. Making them a part of the family's disaster efforts can give them a sense of control and contribution.
 - Show children models of courage, determination, coping, and support. Draw children's attention to those within and outside of the family who face the adversity or who provide support.
- **Seek professional support if needed.** If you are worried about your child showing symptoms that are severe or lasting too long, seek professional advice from your clergy, physician, or mental health agency.

Adapted from resource material from the Illinois Extension Service entitled "After a Disaster," resource material developed by the South Carolina Extension Service entitled "After the Hurricane," and the Kansas State Extension Service